



## **Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress Uniformed Services University School of Medicine**

### **LEADERSHIP AND SUPERVISION FOR BODY RECOVERY IN MASS DEATH**

When the magnitude of death and destruction from an event is severe, many different groups of workers are involved and often work in isolation from each other. Some will undergo the same or similar stresses and emotions; many will have unique stressors and emotions that supervisors are required to understand and manage. Supervision is paramount in maintaining organized and efficient recovery efforts. The following management practices can help minimize difficulties on site and after the event.

- Conflict over jurisdiction can hinder recovery efforts. Assure that workers are performing under proper authority and leadership. National and local authorities are almost always in charge; other countries provide assistance and work within the framework of the country affected. If possible, insist on having a knowledgeable local consultant to assist in understanding cultural practices that pertain to the dead.
- There is usually negligible risk for disease due to dead bodies. Risk of disease from handling dead bodies depends on the diseases that are present in the area, the adequacy of sanitation, and the health practices of the population.
  - Risks present and protective measures should be determined by competent authority.
  - Take into account the beliefs of the population, but beware of myths and superstitions.
  - The health and welfare of the living should be given priority over the recovery and burial of the dead except in extreme circumstances.
- There is always pressure to complete a recovery effort quickly. In spite of such pressure, limit times of exposure of workers to the dead and to the scene and require rest periods as well as regular work shifts.
- Allow people to vary their tasks so they can adjust their exposure. A person who has difficulty with one task may be able to perform successfully in another area.
- Pairing workers with a buddy can help combat potential overwork and having to deal with the stress alone.
- Each person will have a personal way of approaching a scene. It is not advisable to expect the same feelings or actions of everyone. Try to understand each.
- Workers should be advised not to personalize the bodies or the situation. They can be told “Think of it as a job!”
- Provide a rest area for workers with fluids, food, cots, facilities for washing and showering, changes of clothing and protection from news media and onlookers.
- Leaders and supervisors should visit work areas frequently and engage workers in conversation.
- Praise people’s work and reward their efforts. Awards, letters, certificates are all appropriate. Do not forget to personally say “Thank you” to as many as possible.